

Characteristics of Successful Districts



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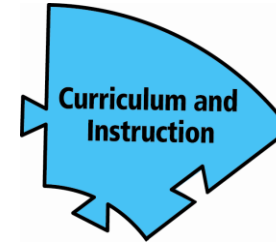
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Contents



<i>Foreword</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>Acknowledgements.....</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>List of Characteristics and Standards.....</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>District Support for Continuous Improvement.....</i>	<i>1</i>
<i>Small and Large Districts...Make it Work for You!.....</i>	<i>3</i>
<i>Implementing the District Self-Assessment.....</i>	<i>4</i>
<i>Connecting District and School Improvement Efforts</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Characteristic I: Vision, Values, and Culture (Standards 1.1 - 1.5).....</i>	<i>7</i>
<i>Characteristic II: Leadership and Governance (Standards 2.1 - 2.4).....</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Characteristic III: Decision Making and Accountability (Standards 3.1 - 3.4).....</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>Characteristic IV: Curriculum and Instruction (Standards 4.1 - 4.5).....</i>	<i>13</i>
<i>Characteristic V: Professional Development & Teacher Quality (Standards 5.1 - 5.5).....</i>	<i>16</i>
<i>Supporting Research.....</i>	<i>19</i>

Foreword

The Department of Public Instruction is committed to ensuring that all Wisconsin students achieve at high levels. We have incredibly talented educators who are committed to creating schools that meet the diverse needs of our students. Many factors affect the success of our classrooms, schools, and districts, and it is important that all practitioners and stakeholders take a step back and critically reflect on current systems and structures that support the mission of our schools and districts to ensure that they are functioning as effectively as possible.



The *Characteristics of Successful Districts* provides districts with a tool to examine their current practices in five key areas. It allows districts to identify and build on their strengths, and address areas that need to be improved. Just as our teachers provide support and guidance to the students in the classroom, districts must offer focused support to each of their schools. These rubrics provide a framework for continuous data gathering and reflection that leads to collaboration and improved strategies to meet the needs of all students. We must continue working to ensure that every child graduates with the knowledge and skills needed for success in the workforce or if they pursue further education.

Acknowledgements

The *Characteristics of Successful Districts* was initially developed after reviewing the available literature on district support for improved school and student performance. In August of 2005, a workgroup of team members from seven Wisconsin school districts developed the indicators for each characteristic. The draft rubric was then used by these districts to conduct a Self-Assessment of efforts to support their low-performing schools. The final version contained in this book is the result of their feedback and the expertise of various stakeholder groups across the state. The workgroup was comprised of the following individuals, who served in the roles listed below at the time that this document was produced.

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List of Characteristics and Standards

CHARACTERISTIC I: VISION, VALUES, AND CULTURE

- Standard 1.1 District Vision and Mission
- Standard 1.2 District Communication with Stakeholders
- Standard 1.3 District Community Partnerships
- Standard 1.4 District Promotion of Positive School Culture
- Standard 1.5 District Support for Safe Learning Environments

CHARACTERISTIC II: LEADERSHIP AND GOVERNANCE

- Standard 2.1 District Support for Leadership—District Administrative Leadership Team and Board of Education
- Standard 2.2 District Support for Leadership—Central Office and School Building Administrators
- Standard 2.3 District Support for Teacher Leadership for Student Achievement
- Standard 2.4 District Training for School Improvement Teams and District Monitoring of School Improvement Plans

CHARACTERISTIC III: DECISION MAKING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

- Standard 3.1 District Development of a Data System for School Improvement
- Standard 3.2 District Use of Data for Resource Allocation to Improve Student Learning
- Standard 3.3 District Use of Fiscal Resources
- Standard 3.4 District Support for School's Data-based Decision Making

CHARACTERISTIC IV: CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

- Standard 4.1 District Curriculum and Instruction Framework
- Standard 4.2 District Curriculum Alignment
- Standard 4.3 District Support for Research-based Instruction
- Standard 4.4 District Use of Data to Close Achievement Gaps
- Standard 4.5 District Support for Interventions and Extended Learning Opportunities

CHARACTERISTIC V: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND TEACHER QUALITY

- Standard 5.1 District Support of Initial Educators
- Standard 5.2 District Professional Development Model
- Standard 5.3 District Recruitment and Retention of Highly Qualified, Experienced Teachers
- Standard 5.4 District Support of Orientation and Mentoring for Principals
- Standard 5.5 District Support for Principals as Instructional Leaders

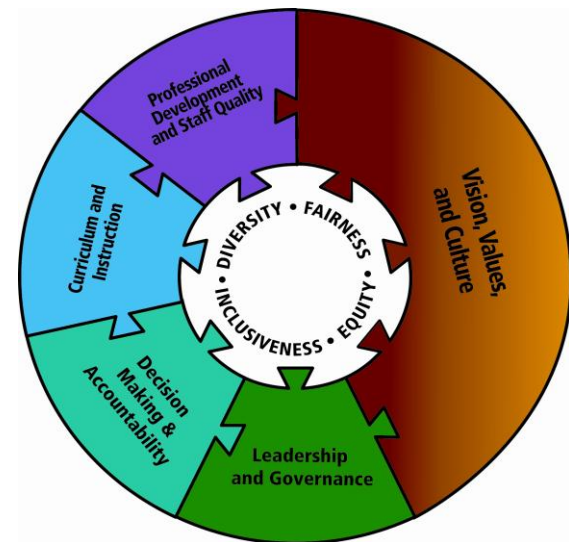
District Support for Continuous Improvement

District-Focused School Improvement

While much research in the past two decades has focused on school improvement, only recently has there been a movement to focus on the district role in school improvement planning. Though many districts and agencies across Wisconsin have school improvement planning policies, resources, and tools, there is often little focus on examining the district's direct role in improving student performance.

The *Characteristics of Successful Districts* is designed to assess effective district support, differentiated for its low-performing schools. Built into these rubrics is the idea that no “one-size-fits-all” policy or program can impact school and student achievement, especially in those schools with the greatest needs.

These research-driven rubrics allow districts to focus not only on school improvement planning, but on other aspects of district practice that influence school and student performance. The application of these Characteristics through a district self-assessment helps districts examine how effectively their district culture, leadership, data systems, professional development models, and support of curriculum and instructional practices impact school achievement. While the Characteristics address these critical areas of district functioning, they also focus on other relevant relationships, programs, and policies that a district designs and implements to effectively support its schools.



Philosophy and Development of the *Characteristics of Successful Districts*

The *Characteristics of Successful Districts* was developed initially as a key component of Wisconsin's Statewide System of Support (SSOS)—as part of the requirements of *No Child Left Behind*. These standards are the basis for a District Self-Assessment process, an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of a district's support to its low-performing schools. These rubrics are grounded in systems and structures at the district level that have been documented to have a positive impact on student achievement.

The driving forces behind the development of these rubrics and the Self-Assessment process include: strengthening existing capacity for school improvement at the building level, examining how districts are allocating their resources, and utilizing a variety of stakeholders to improve and coordinate district support systems. Districts that have used the Self-Assessment process experienced a variety of benefits, including: a more systemic and aligned approach to supporting low-performing schools, an enhanced ability to utilize data, increased stakeholder input, differentiated allocation of resources, and a thorough examination of the impact of services that are currently being delivered.

Building capacity for district and school improvement at the district level is a predominant goal in the development of these rubrics. By facilitating a district-level examination of practices, programs, and policies that focus on enhancing school performance, the *Characteristics of Successful Districts* and its Self-Assessment process can assist a district in identifying specific areas to improve the support a district provides to its low-performing schools.



Small and Large Districts...Make it Work for You!

One of the key strengths of the District Self-Assessment process is the ability of districts to design an experience that works within the size, structure, and local context of their district. Districts, along with the assistance of an experienced facilitator, develop a plan for implementing this reflective process. There is no recipe for how it should be done, because the process is contextual and must be designed to provide the district with the most honest and accurate information, especially as it supports its low-performing schools.

Some standards may be more appropriately applicable to larger districts. If a smaller district can use the intent of the standard and adapt it to practices in its own district, then change the language so that it better fits your district. If the standard is really not applicable to your district, do not spend time on that standard.

Remember, you are engaging in this process to promote dialogue that will give you information to make changes necessary to support your low-performing schools. Make the *Characteristics of Successful Districts* work for you!

Implementing the District Self-Assessment

The District Self-Assessment has been piloted and implemented in many districts, both large and small, around the state of Wisconsin. Feedback from participants has led us to embrace some key practices when implementing successful District Self-Assessments. Below are some of those guidelines from those who have experienced this process.

- Use an external facilitator to coordinate and lead the process.
- Put together a leadership team that works closely with the facilitator to design a Self-Assessment process that best meets your needs.
- Bring key district leaders on board before you begin the process.
- Involve a variety of stakeholders in the process (teachers, administrators, students, parents, community members).
- Design a data collection plan (review current data and determine new sources of data) to ensure that you are gathering data from a variety of sources, from multiple stakeholders.
- Make sure that an action plan results from the District Self-Assessment process. Use this as an opportunity to revisit current plans.
- Build in a variety of ways to communicate the purposes and the findings of the Self-Assessment with key district stakeholders.

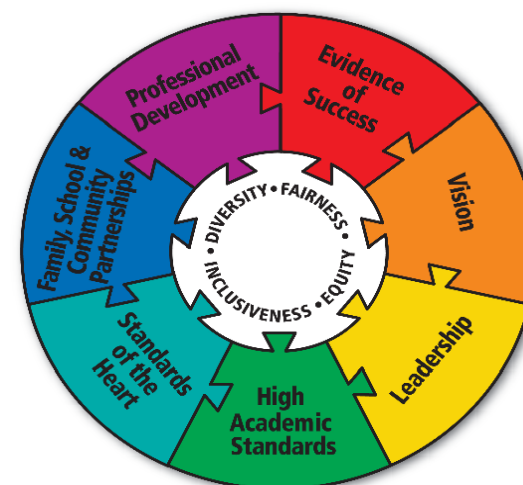
For more information about the District Self-Assessment, including the District Self-Assessment Handbook, go to <http://dpi.wi.gov/ssos/index.html>.

Connecting District and School Improvement Efforts

Characteristics of Successful Schools

In 2000, the Department of Public Instruction released the *Characteristics of Successful Schools* guide. Based on research, this framework was designed to summarize the critical characteristics present in schools that have been successful in closing the achievement gap. The characteristics of successful schools are:

- **Vision:** Having a common understanding of goals, principles, and expectations for everyone in the learning community
- **Leadership:** Having a group of individuals dedicated to helping the learning community reach its vision
- **High Academic Standards:** Describing what students need to know and be able to do
- **Standards of the Heart:** Helping all within the learning community become caring, contributing, productive, and responsible citizens
- **Family, School, and Community Partnerships:** “Making room at the table” for a child’s first and most influential teachers
- **Professional Development:** Providing consistent, meaningful opportunities for adults in the school setting to engage in continuous learning
- **Evidence of Success:** Collecting and analyzing data about students, programs, and staff



Central to the implementation of these characteristics is equity, diversity, fairness, and inclusiveness. Each characteristic listed above must include and attend to these important principles, commitments, and the corresponding responsive practices.

The Characteristics formed the basis for school improvement needs assessments surveys and tools available on the Wisconsin Information Network for Successful Schools (WINSS) website www.dpi.wi.gov/sig/index.html. These tools have been used by many Wisconsin schools. The *Characteristics of Successful Districts* is the logical next step. This framework provides district-level staff the opportunity to examine the impact that district decisions and support are having on student success in low-performing schools. Successful schools are supported by efficient, responsive district systems and structures. The *Characteristics of Successful Districts* delineates the support and guidance that such districts provide.

Improvement efforts, whether initiated at the school or district level, must promote research-based strategies. The accompanying graphic shows the connection between the *Characteristics of Successful Schools* and the *Characteristics of Successful Districts*. These combined characteristics create the basis for improvement efforts in any educational system.

